

CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON REFUGEES

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This exploration must begin with the recollection that my childhood was shaped in part by the very real presence of immigrants—economic refugees. In the late 1950s, my grandparents stepped up as members of a Lutheran congregation that wanted to sponsor a Lutheran refugee family from Germany. A specific family was needed to be the sponsors, and my grandparents volunteered to be that family. Was it because my maternal great-grandfather had come to America in the late nineteenth century, saying—as my grandmother once told me—“he wouldn’t fight in the Kaiser’s stupid wars?” I never thought to ask about their motivation. At some point in my preschool years, though, we welcomed a German war veteran and his wife into our extended family.

The veteran had been captured on both the Eastern and Western fronts and had spent time in Soviet and American POW camps. Struggling in the difficult post-war German economy, he and his wife as a young couple chose to seek their future in the United States. Very soon they had a child, adding one more to our extended family. The veteran is now retired from a distinguished career as a professor of German language and culture at a number of colleges up and down the East Coast; his wife died some years ago. But at my grandparents’ dining room table, at Thanksgiving or just on a random Sunday afternoon, they were very much like cousins to us. The idea of kindness and support for the alien first came to me not only as mother’s milk in my family; it came also as gospel truth from our church.

Grounding that truth in scripture can take a number of different turns. My research has taken me into the literature of the refugee advocacy community and the official documents of the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches as well as my own searching of Christian scripture for relevant themes. There is not a lot of variation among the denominations or the advocacy groups; many of the same materials turn up time and time again. With regard to scriptural sources that address our relationship with refugees, I would suggest that three broad clusters can be identified. These are distinguished from one another by the character of each of the three parties involved in a divinely guided encounter between oneself and a refugee: Our relationship with refugees can be grounded in who we are; it can be grounded in who the other is; and it can be grounded in who God is. Beyond the question of the direct encounter with refugees, we also can explore the scriptural sources relating to the conditions which drive refugees from their homes and create the conditions that they face. We will begin with the direct encounter and its three points of grounding.

Encountering refugees on the basis of our identity

The first cluster of sources speaks to our character as people of God and the way in which it defines our relationship to those who have been dislocated from their homes. Within this first cluster, we can further discern three sets of sources that characterize the people of God in somewhat different dimensions. For some, we are *a people descended from refugees*. The International Association for Refugees has compiled a list of nearly thirty biblical characters, plus the collective people Israel, who are in some sense refugees.¹ Many of these come easily to mind from familiar biblical stories, even if the label “refugee” is not one we might choose first to identify the characters: Adam and Eve, Cain, Jacob and his eleven sons, Naomi, and Ruth. Less obvious figures like David and Jeremiah are included. Within the New Testament, Philip and Peter and Aquila and Priscilla are all also identified as refugees at some point, fleeing persecution. Even if it seems a bit of a stretch to include Noah fleeing the flood or Jonah fleeing God’s word or the midrashically driven account of the infant Jesus fleeing Herod, there is ample evidence that Christians can be considered, spiritually if not genetically, the descendants of people who needed refuge.

A second dimension of this first cluster appeals to Christians as *people who want to treat God and the angels well* when God appears in the person of the stranger. So in Matthew 25, the Christian reader is implicitly encouraged to be among the sheep and not the goats in the last judgment. Where those figures differ is that the sheep have tended to Jesus when he was present in the “least of these”: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25: 35, 40; this and all subsequent biblical quotations are from the NRSV). The author of Hebrews also exhorts believers not to neglect the love of strangers (*philoxenia*), “for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2).

Thirdly, Christians may themselves be characterized more immediately as *refugees or exiles*. This can be set forth as either a negative or a positive aspect of Christian experience. When it is negative, the end of exile is one of God’s gracious gifts. Not surprisingly, given his Jewish orientation, it is Paul who sets this theme in motion by quoting Hosea: “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved’” (Romans 9:25; citing Hosea 2:23). The author of Ephesians more explicitly states that the Gentile believers who were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise . . . , who once were far off have been brought near” (2:12-13). “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (2:19). Exile and alienation here are negative experiences; being received as a citizen is the welcome redress of that alienated status.

The situation of exile can also be cast in more a positive light, suggesting that it distinguishes the Christian community from a dominant society of lesser value. So Paul can write to the Philippians that “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20), implying that Christians remain exiles here on earth. First Peter also maintains that the status of exile still applies to the baptized community and affords it an ethical guide. Like Paul, the author uses the quotation from Hosea 2 to assert that the community is God’s people. Rather than receiving a promise of escape from that condition, though, the community is then urged “as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh” (2:11). In Hebrews, too, the state of alienation continues as a distinguishing and edifying mark of the community. Just as their Israelite ancestors were witnesses and models, who “confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth . . . [who] desire a better country, that is, a

heavenly one" (11:13-16), so the believers also "have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (13:14).

The first cluster of sources thus grounds a relationship with refugees in the identity of the Christian believer, whether as a descendant of refugees, as one who seeks to treat God and angels well in the person of strangers or "the least of these," or as one who is existentially a stranger and alien in this life, even if that status does not imply alienation or exile from the realm of God's election and care.

Encountering refugees on the basis of their experience

The second cluster grounds the relationship with refugees in the character of the other, the one who seeks refuge. In the New Testament, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) gives the *locus classicus* for this: apart from any other characteristic that may define relationships or barriers to relationships, it is the simple need of the downtrodden and abandoned that calls the Samaritan traveler to do good. Recognizing the need and responding to it is what defines the Samaritan as a neighbor. In the church's Old Testament, the Jewish Bible or TN"K, a similarly familiar trope is the oft-repeated admonition in the Torah that "you shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). Here, too, it is not the character of the compassionate individual that is at stake, but the anguish that is in "the heart of an alien" that constitutes the relationship. That anguish is known to the one of whom compassion is expected, to be sure, but the focus is on the experience of the sufferer as the factor that draws the two together.

This may be symbolized in a midrashic turn on the frequency of the admonition that has been used by Rabbi Margaret Frisch Klein² and, I presume, many others. In the Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Metzia* 49b, Rabbi Eliezer is quoted to the effect that the Torah warns 36 times, or perhaps 46 times, against oppressing a stranger (specifically, a proselyte). The number 36 has become more common in the tradition: it is double the number represented in *gematria*³ by the word *chai*, meaning "life." Thus, one might understand that in meeting a stranger, two lives are on the line—the life of the alien and the life of the Israelite, inherently yoked in the shared experience of their hearts.

The seemingly obvious scriptural references to the "cities of refuge," stipulated by God and implemented under Joshua (Numbers 35:9-15;

Joshua 20), do not appear in the literature I have surveyed. Nevertheless, the establishment of these cities in biblical Israel's memory relates to the character of the collective other who benefits from them, the refugees. Because they have shed human blood with apparent inadvertence, they are entitled to refuge until such time as the community has made a judgment about their culpability. Should the claim of inadvertence be found empty, the change in their status strips them of the refuge due to them while the case was uncertain.

Encountering refugees on the basis of God's character

A third cluster of texts suggests yet another ground for the relationship with the refugee, beyond the character of the Christian self and the character of the other. This is a cluster that centers in the psalms and characterizes God as the refuge. Fifteen times the psalmists address God or call out to God as refuge, casting themselves as refugees seeking shelter, hope, escape, and respite. The image is also present in Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as in Proverbs (14:26), where the fear of the Lord is what offers refuge.

In the New Testament, the word, "refuge," appears consistently in English translations only at Hebrews 6:18, where it appears idiomatically in the translation of a Greek verb as "taken refuge," and the implicit reference is God. Moreover, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), a common equivalent of the Hebrew words for refuge, *mahseh* and *ma'oz*, is *elpis*, or hope. The focus on God as the source of hope in the New Testament needs little elaboration.

From this cluster, one can infer that the Christian's relationship with the refugee is grounded in the ethical posture of *imitatio dei*, doing as God does. If we are to be, as Luther put it, "little Christs" to one another in the world; if, as Paul says, it is not we who live in ourselves but Christ who lives in us; if the Christian life is a life of godliness, then part of the Christian vocation is to be a refuge to those who seek refuge, as God is a refuge to us when we seek it.

Scripture and beyond

In this brief survey, I have suggested that Christian scripture affords three perspectives grounding a relationship with refugees in, respectively, the identity of the self, the experience of the other, and the character of God.

To be sure, one might challenge the apparently simple magnanimity of these three approaches with biblical concerns about self-protection, discernment of spirits, avoidance of evildoers, protection of the community and individuals from harm, and similar cautionary and moral caveats. Such scriptural caveats may offer Christians a basis on which to argue for a nuanced and prudent ethical course when encountering refugees. But the caveats do not appear in those passages of scripture where the issue of refuge is central, so one would also have to articulate the hermeneutics that brings them into the arena with the evident claims that refugees make on the Christian conscience. On their own, the three clusters I have profiled, with the several dimensions of each, suggest Christian concern for and openness to refugees that is as broadly applicable as it is deeply grounded in the self, the other, and God.

Scriptural references to refuge and refugees address the question of response upon encountering one who seeks refuge. In our day, a thorough view must also take into account the circumstances which put refugees onto their perilous journeys, including both economics and violent conflict. The globalized economy, for example, in which economic pressures drive dislocation and relocation so powerfully, is the starting point in the 1999 Social Statement from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All.”⁴ Even the distinction between refugees and other immigrants becomes more difficult in such an economic environment.

Specific reference is made to refugees in the statement only once, in regard to the church’s concern for adequate income assistance to those in need, including “citizens, documented immigrants, and refugees.” Yet, in discussing the condition of “well over a billion people in the world [who] are deprived of what they need to meet their basic needs,” the statement points to the other salient dynamic in engendering a refugee crisis. It notes that “political struggles, militarism, and warfare add to this travesty, displacing masses of people from their homes.” What scripture has to say about poverty and about war is thus directly relevant to the consideration of refugees, whose lives are uprooted by one or both.

The sources on which one can draw regarding these issues are manifold. The relevant ELCA social statements can serve to focus our brief exploration. “Outrage over the plight of people living in poverty is a theme throughout the Bible,” summarizes the ELCA statement on

economic life.⁵ “The poor are those who live precariously between subsistence and utter deprivation.” As examples of this theme, it cites Amos 5:11 and the charge of “trampl[ing] on the poor”; Psalms 37:14 with its characterization of “the wicked [who] draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy”; and Isaiah 10:1-2 calling down woe to “you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right.” In Jesus’ parables, teachings, and disputes, the danger of riches and the contempt for the poor that they can engender get repeated attention, and Luke portrays the early Christian community as one in which such dynamics are meant to be beyond the pale, as Ananias and Sapphira learned to their tragic regret (Acts 5:1-11).

In an earlier social statement on peace in 1995,⁶ the ELCA is somewhat more expansive on the specific issue of refugees. In its penultimate section, as part of the task of “A Politics of Cooperation,” that statement addressed “Care for the Uprooted”:

Tens of millions are refugees in foreign lands. At least as many are internally displaced. In unprecedented numbers people have had to flee their homes because of persecution or general violence. We support compassionate survival assistance for refugees and vigorous international protection for them. The world community has a responsibility to aid nations that receive refugees and to help change the situations from which they have fled. In our own country, we support a generous policy of welcome for refugees and immigrants. We pledge to continue our church’s historic leadership in caring for refugees and immigrants.

It was as part of that leadership effort that my grandparents volunteered to be the host family for German refugees in my youth, brought to this country through Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). Among the implementing resolutions accompanying the adoption of the social statement were an exhortation to the congregations of the ELCA to give generous support to LIRS, as well as a directive to send the statement to legislative and executive leadership of the US Government and to the secretary general of the United Nations, “as a sign of our commitment to work with them for a more peaceful world.”

This commitment is grounded from the outset of the statement on biblical and theological convictions. The first section, “A God of Peace,” opens with the bald assertion that “the biblical narrative reveals God’s resolve for peace.” In creation, the election of Israel, and the redemptive revelation of Jesus Christ, the Christian community is witness to God’s commitment to peace. It also receives its call to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-6). The spirit thus empowers the church to be “a community of peace” called to work through political responsibility for “a culture of peace,” “an economy with justice,” and, as already noted, “a politics of cooperation.”

Not only in direct encounter with refugees, then, but also in engagement with broader social, political, and economic dynamics that scatter refugees across the planet, Christians have in their scriptures a consistent and clear testimony—indeed, a clarion call—to their responsibility. It is a responsibility they can recognize because of their own experience as refugees and the descendants of refugees. It is a responsibility they can feel because they know the heart of the stranger who is a refugee. It is a responsibility they can take up with assurance because of God’s own character as refuge and hope, and Christians are empowered to make this real in the world as ambassadors and witnesses of the God of peace and promise.

Conclusion

When Jacob was fleeing his brother Esau, he came to “a certain place” (Genesis 28:11), where he dreamt of a ladder and heard God’s promise to provide for him a place and progeny and blessing, renewing the promise of his ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekkah. Awakening from the dream, he exclaimed, “Surely the LORD is in *this place*—and I did not know it! . . . How awesome is *this place*!” (Genesis 28:16-17, emphasis added). Rabbinic commentary on this passage and later Jewish euphemism point out that “The Place” (*hammaqom*) is one term of reference for God. When Jacob “came to this place,” one could say that he “met God” (*Genesis Rabbah* 68:9). So, too, for any refugee who comes to a place of promise, where a new future becomes possible. For Christians in the heritage of Jacob/Israel, of the psalmists, and of Jesus, it is God who gives such hope and it is God who calls them to offer such hope to others.

Notes

1. "Refugees in the Bible," unpublished, available under the title at <http://iafr.org/toolbox> (accessed 15 April 2018).
2. "The Joy of Welcoming the Stranger," *The Energizer Rabbi*, <http://www.theenergizerrabbi.org/2017/01/03/the-joy-of-welcoming-the-stranger/> (accessed 15 April 2018).
3. A system by which letters have numerical value and a word can therefore be associated with a corresponding number.
4. Adopted at the sixth churchwide assembly held August 16-22, 1999, in Denver CO, available at <http://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Economic-Life> (accessed 15 April 2018). Subsequent quotations from ELCA social statements are so indicated in the body of the text, without further citation, since the statements are without page or section numbers.
5. Ibid.
6. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "For Peace in God's World," adopted at the fourth churchwide assembly in Minneapolis MN, August 20, 1995, available at <http://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Peace> (accessed 19 May 2018).